

# Older People and Physical Activity

## Collective learning from 9 local organisations

In order to inform future service delivery, Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) has captured the **collective learning and recommendations about physical activity from 9 local organisations working with older people in Bristol**. These organisations are all part of the Bristol Support Hub for Older People or connected to the BAB programme.

The learning is focused around 3 themes:

1. **Tips for engaging older people in physical activity.**
2. **Tips for reducing drop-out rates for older people's physical activity.**
3. **Tips for combining physical activity with social connection.**

This collective learning comes from:

- ▶ **Active Ageing Bristol:** Supports local practitioners to develop physical activity groups which can be accessed in person, online and via the telephone.
- ▶ **Age UK Bristol and LinkAge:** We have a long history of delivering physical activity to support good health balanced with opportunities to meet new people and enjoy yourself.
- ▶ **Age UK Somerset:** We run a wide range of exercise sessions including strength and balance, chair-based classes, yoga and tai chi for older people in Somerset and North Somerset.
- ▶ **Alive:** We engage older people in a range of activity, from gentle exercise to reminiscence in a wide range of care settings in North Somerset, Bristol, South Gloucestershire and B&NES.
- ▶ **Bristol Bears Community Foundation:** From seated dance to inclusive ball games, we offer fun and accessible physical activity for all ability levels.
- ▶ **Revive Fitness:** We teach a variety of fitness classes for all abilities, with an emphasis on having fun. Classes are held in person across South Bristol and are live streamed on Zoom.
- ▶ **Sight Support West:** We are a local charity supporting blind and partially sighted people across Bristol, Bath and South Gloucestershire.
- ▶ **The Exercise Club Clifton:** We teach strength training, balance and co-ordination training, specialising in, but not exclusively for, older adults in a fun, light hearted way.
- ▶ **Young Bristol:** We run a gig rowing and water activity session for people aged over 55, with the opportunity to also try open canoeing or kayaking.



# Executive Summary

## Tips for engaging older people in physical activity

- ▶ Use a variety of publicity channels
- ▶ Real images and video clips
- ▶ Positive beginner-friendly language
- ▶ Make it fun, with more emphasis on the enjoyment rather than being physical
- ▶ Have a one-to-one conversation in advance
- ▶ Take into account people's previous experiences
- ▶ Provide opportunities to watch
- ▶ Keep it low commitment
- ▶ The type and duration of the activity
- ▶ Adapt to disabilities
- ▶ Transport
- ▶ Improved connections with health services and other community activities

## Tips for reducing drop-out rates for older people's physical activity

- ▶ Finding out individual motivations and circumstances
- ▶ Warm welcome
- ▶ Let people take it at their own pace
- ▶ More than one pair of hands
- ▶ The instructor makes a big difference
- ▶ Make it fun and varied
- ▶ Be clear how the activities are useful
- ▶ A sense of involvement and ownership
- ▶ Encourage older people to participate in other activities
- ▶ Keep in touch

## Tips for combining physical activity with social connection

- ▶ Remember the social side is a key motivation
- ▶ Build social opportunities into the activities themselves
- ▶ Allow time for socialising before and/or after the activity
- ▶ Actively introduce people to each other
- ▶ Make an occasion of it

## Tips for engaging older people in physical activity

### 1 Use a variety of publicity channels

Many of these organisations have found it works well to use a **wide variety of methods** to promote the physical activity including through:

- ▶ Printed leaflets in GP surgeries, pharmacies, health and community centres and libraries.
- ▶ Social media.
- ▶ Social prescribing services or other organisations who offer one-to-one support in the community (e.g. Somerset Village Agents).
- ▶ The venue that the activity takes place in.
- ▶ Word of mouth – including asking people to bring along a friend or neighbour next time.

Other publicity methods can also be valuable but may present their own challenges, for example including information in printed newspapers or having the time to reach people on a one-to-one basis.

It is important to **tailor the promotion to a variety of target audiences; older people themselves, but also their friends, family and neighbours** who might be able to tell them about it. This may mean using different promotional materials for different publicity channels.

### 2 Images and video clips

A number of these organisations have found it useful to include **real images and video clips** of the physical activity in their promotion. It is important for these to show a **wide variety of people, with different levels of fitness, mobility and body shapes**, and for those pictured to be **having fun** while doing the activity rather than being too serious.

Similarly, it can help for the **instructor to avoid wearing 'traditional' sports clothes such as lycra** in these images, as this can be intimidating for those who are less used to physical activity or who are worried about 'being too old' to take part.

If the physical activity has changed as a result of the pandemic (for example taking place online, in a different venue, outside, or with different equipment), then up-to-date images and videos can help to **provide reassurance** and give people the extra information they need.

Video clips work well for social media and websites, although viewers will often move on after

approximately 20 seconds, so it's important for the **fun and other main messages to be captured early on in the video.**

An example video from Revive Fitness can be found [here](#).

One of the organisations used images and videos for online materials, but chose to avoid images in printed materials due to only being able to choose one or two images. With fewer options, there may be a higher chance that the chosen image will deter people from taking part (e.g. the activity looking too easy/hard, the people looking too old/young, assumptions about fitness levels etc.); **it is hard to find images that appeal to everyone.**

### 3 Language used

When engaging older people in physical activity, many of these organisations **emphasised that it was for all ability levels including complete beginners.** They also often moved the narrative away from exercise being about changing body shape towards benefits such as staying healthy, staying independent and boosting mental wellbeing.

As with the images and videos, it is important for the **language to be positive, focusing on the activity being fun, welcoming and low-key.** Some people are not used to giving themselves time to do something they enjoy; they may need to be encouraged to give themselves permission to do this, framing it as an investment in themselves.

It works well to avoid having too much text on one page when promoting the activity. Explain what the activity is in a way that is **simple and avoids jargon, making sure the time and place are clear.** Visually, make it easy for people to read who may not have their glasses to hand or who have visual impairments.

### 4 Make the physical activity fun and engaging, with an emphasis more on the enjoyment rather than being physical

The thought of physical activity for some older people **may seem daunting or challenging,** and sometimes off-putting. By **changing the emphasis of the activity into something more social or even creative,** people may begin to enjoy themselves more. The key to this is to **promote physical activity in a way that doesn't feel like exercise.**

Take time to find out more about the interests of the people and together you can create ways to make physical activity more meaningful and therefore more enjoyable.





## 5 Have a one-to-one conversation in advance

Most of these organisations had a **one-to-one conversation with anyone interested before they took part in the activity**. This enabled them to find out the **individual's motivations, as well as their anxieties and any potential barriers to attending**. In some cases this conversation took place in person at the activity venue, while in other cases it was a telephone or video call.

**Lack of confidence can be a common barrier** to older people engaging in physical activity. This one-to-one conversation gives participants the chance to ask questions and to feel that they are being listened to and taken seriously. This is particularly valuable for those who are nervous about attending and would like to know what to expect in advance. Some instructors **directly ask people if there is anything worrying them about the activity** and, if so, what they can do to help alleviate these worries or break down these barriers.

However it is important for the person organising the activity to **have enough capacity to hold these conversations and answer questions without the older person feeling rushed or not listened to properly**. Similarly, it helps to provide both email, mobile and landline contact options; sometimes people do not want to ring a mobile due to fears about the cost but are happier to call a landline number.

## 6 Take into account people's previous experiences

**Previous experiences, whether positive or negative, can play a key role when trying to engage older people in physical activity**. It can be valuable to find out an individual's past experience with that activity, including memories from their time at school, and to **move past any negative associations**.

Take time to **understand where that individual is coming from** and what physical activities they have previously enjoyed or tried. Similarly, find out any physical activity they have been doing during the Covid-19 pandemic, even if only small, and recognise the journey they have gone through over the past 18 months.

Some people might **assume that certain activities are 'not for them'**, particularly if they associate the activity with a different socio-economic background, gender or culture. In these cases they will likely need **further incentives in order to try the activity**, for example free taster sessions or free transport.

## 7 Opportunities to watch

It can work well to offer people the **opportunity to come and watch the physical activity first before they join in**. This helps them to know what to expect as well as answering practical questions such as what to wear. In many cases, **those watching will often end up joining in the activity** while they are there.

Similarly, **doing the activity somewhere visible to the public (e.g. in a park) can be a great advert in itself**. Passers-by can see that people are enjoying it and they can enquire or tell others about it. Given that they are there anyway, it means the location will likely be accessible for them, which reduces one of the barriers to taking part. **However some people may feel self-conscious about doing physical activity in a public setting**, and may prefer somewhere with slightly more privacy from passers-by.

## 8 Keep it low commitment

**Keeping the level of commitment low** can help to initially engage older people in physical activity. **Some people don't wish to commit to a block of classes in one go** and there are multiple reasons for this including changeable levels of energy due to a physical or mental health condition, frequent but irregular medical appointments, financial reasons and other changing social or care commitments.

If possible, offer the **option of participating on a drop-in basis**. Free or low-cost taster sessions can also work well to encourage initial engagement. Similarly, some people may only want to do some parts of the activity and not others, so it can work well to offer these opportunities too if it is suitable for the activity.

Part of this low commitment involves **not needing any specialist equipment or clothing**, if possible. Needing to buy or wear certain clothes can be a barrier for some people, especially if they are not sure they will enjoy the activity. Activities such as tai chi may be particularly appealing it can be done in 'everyday' clothes without even getting changed.



## 9 The type and duration of the activity

Individuals will likely already have **preconceived ideas about whether a certain type of physical activity is 'for them'**. These ideas are connected to wider beliefs and stereotypes about things such as age, gender, class, body size and body shape. They are also connected to assumptions about the skills or fitness needed prior to starting an activity. Somebody who is not a strong swimmer, for example, may be unlikely to consider watersports as something they could possibly do, despite this not being a requirement of some watersports activities.

On the other hand, some older people may **feel frustrated at not having the opportunity to participate in activities typically seen as 'for younger people'** such as trampolining and assault courses. It is important to have a **wide range of physical activities on offer** in a local community so that people can try out a variety of options and find what they enjoy doing.

The duration of a physical activity will also affect people's engagement. Some older people, particularly those who live locally or have lower levels of mobility, may prefer a shorter activity of around 20 minutes. This may be easier for them to fit into their day and reduces the mental barrier of needing to give up significant amount of time. However others may be less likely to attend these shorter activities, particularly if it would result in more time spent travelling than doing the activity. **There is no 'right' duration for an activity, but it will have an influence on who feels comfortable to attend.**

The organisations involved in this learning report recommend doing research into what is not currently on offer in a local area, finding out what type and duration of physical activity older residents want and considering how your physical activity can fit into that.

## 10 Adapting to disabilities

Many people wishing to take part in physical activity have disabilities, whether they are physical, mental or sensory. It is important to **understand these needs and adapt what you are doing** to be as inclusive as possible.

**Seek support from specialists if you are unsure.** A visual awareness trainer for example will be able to advise on what can be included to increase the accessibility of the activity you are offering and could provide training to help the instructor be aware of the needs of blind and partially sighted participants.



## 11 Transport

As with other types of activity, transport can be a significant barrier to older people engaging in physical activity. **The choice of venue, including its accessibility by public transport and the availability of free parking, will influence who engages in that activity.**

There is no one size fits all solution when finding a venue, and venue options can be limited in many areas, but this decision **should be informed by an understanding of the associated transport barriers** and how these will influence engagement.

## 12 Improved connections with health services and other community activities

In the longer-term, older people's engagement with physical activity would greatly benefit from a **more joined up approach between organisations working with an individual.** Bristol has lots of resources (including people, assets and structural resources), but needs to be better connected in order to fully make the most of these.

For physical activity, older people's engagement would benefit from connections with GPs and other health services who could **inform people about what is available locally and influence a change of mindset towards prevention.** Social prescribing services are one step towards this increase in information but further connections would improve older people's engagement in the longer-term.



## Tips for reducing drop-out rates for older people's physical activity

### 1 Finding out individual motivations and circumstances

**Take the time to find out an individual's motivation for taking part in your physical activity** – What do they enjoy about it? What would they like to get out of it? Do they have any goals they'd like to achieve? Similarly, **talk to them about any barriers** they may be experiencing, or if there are any parts of the activity that they don't enjoy.

Some people **may be reluctant to tell you the whole truth at first**, particularly if they are embarrassed or they are worried it could mean they are not permitted to do some parts of the activity. It is valuable for the instructor to **keep checking in** with them as they get to know each other more, as they may feel more comfortable sharing additional motivations and barriers once familiarity has built up.

“ *It's the one chance older people have to feel elegant again.* ”  
- Volunteer tai chi instructor

### 2 Warm welcome

It is so important to **offer someone a warm welcome** when they join a physical activity, particularly if it is their first session. **These activities can often be daunting** and it may have taken a while for that individual to build up their confidence to come along. If they have a negative experience with one activity or do not feel welcomed, **it can knock their confidence or motivation and mean they are less likely to try out other activities too.**

Organisations involved in this learning report recommend **acknowledging that it is someone's first session and having a chat with them at the start.** It can work well for some of the other participants to be on **'meet and greet' duty**, welcoming new people when they arrive, explaining how the session works and **introducing them to others.**

Talk to them at the end of the session as well, **asking them how it was for them** and making sure you've got their contact details. It can work well to send them an email afterwards to say how nice it was to meet them and to tell them about upcoming sessions. **This small amount of administration afterwards can make a big difference** in whether return.

Continue this warm welcome even when it is not someone's first session. Make an effort to **greet people by name** and get to know them as individuals. Specific activities can also encourage people to talk to each other and feel part of the group, for example **doing games in pairs.**

### 3 Let people take it at their own pace

Offer a **variety of options** for people to take the physical activity at their own pace, and **for all of these options to be socially acceptable within the group environment**. Some older people might be reluctant to do a lower-impact version of an activity, particularly if this is a result of a newly experienced physical limitation or if they have historically done higher-impact activities.

That said, don't be afraid of a hard work out either. **Internalised stereotypes about older people can sometimes lead to anxiety about doing more challenging work outs** or feelings of "I'm too old to do that, that's not what I should be doing at my age". However these can still be possible as long as they are within the boundaries of what is safe for each individual.

It works well when individuals **feel reassured** that the instructor is knowledgeable, has their best interests at heart and is prepared to adapt activities on the spot if needed.

### 4 More than one pair of hands

Many of the organisations found it **useful to have an extra pair of hands** during a physical activity session. In some cases this was an **additional instructor** who could keep an eye out for anyone needing additional support, provide one-to-one guidance during the session and if needed split up a bigger group into two smaller ones.

Other activities involved **volunteers or proactive members who were willing to help others** and give new people a warm welcome by introducing them to others.

### 5 The instructor makes a big difference

**The instructor can play a large role in reducing drop-out rates** for older people's physical activity. If they have enthusiasm and clearly love what they do, this can rub off on participants and act as a motivator. Organisations reported **making it clear that the instructor cared about the group and had people's best interests at heart** rather than only seeing it as a job. However it is also useful to keep in mind that not everybody will want a loud and bubbly instructor; energy levels may need to be adapted to the individual.

Similarly, instructors can use their choice of clothing to create an informal atmosphere. Some people may be put off by clothing that looks too serious or specialist. There is the potential for instructors to **have fun with their choice of clothing and create a friendly vibe**.

## 6 Make it fun and varied

Keeping older people interested and involved in a physical activity can often be **less about the activity itself and more about the way it's delivered and the atmosphere.**

All of the organisations emphasized the importance of **making the activity fun** so that people have an enjoyable time during the session. Examples include using items from home during the activities (such as tins of food), playing different styles of music, building in games and **being playful and silly.**

Similarly, making it fun involves **changing it up regularly** rather than repeating the same activity every time. Regular variation means that, if somebody doesn't like one of the activities one week, they are likely to still continue engaging because they know it won't be the same the next time.

## 7 Be clear how the activities are useful

It can also work well to **explain how each physical activity is useful, making it relevant to everyday activities.** For example explaining how a certain movement will help with getting in and out of chairs, with picking up something you've dropped on the floor or with getting out of the bath. This can help to motivate people because they understand why it is valuable for them.

## 8 A sense of involvement and ownership

People are less likely to drop out of a physical activity if they **feel a sense of ownership.** This can be created by **sharing out responsibilities** between a number of people in the group, for example helping to set out the equipment at the beginning.

Similarly, **gather people's suggestions and tailor the activity** towards those if possible. This can be something as small as suggesting the music to play the following week, or it might involve collectively deciding which part of the body to focus on that week. Regularly ask people how a movement feels for them, **turning the physical activity into a two-way conversation** rather than solely being directed by the instructor.

## 9 Encourage older people to participate in other activities

It can work well to **share other opportunities with the people attending your physical activity**. These might be physical activities or other types of non-physical activity happening in the same venue or locality that they might enjoy. For some people, **attending your activity may help to build their confidence to try out other opportunities**, and they may be more likely to do so if the suggestion comes from somebody familiar who they have built up a trusting relationship with over time.

## 10 Keep in touch

**Keep in touch with people who are unable to attend for a while**, for example due to an injury. This helps them to feel that they are still involved in the activity and can reduce drop-out rates. Some of the organisations involved in this learning report did this on a **one-to-one basis, whereas others used mailing lists**.

Similarly, some people may come along to a few sessions and then not come back. It can be valuable to **check in with them after they've missed a few sessions** to see if there's anything you can do to help them to return.





## Tips for combining physical activity with social connection for older people

### 1 Remember that the social side is a key motivation

All of the organisations found that, **while people may initially join for the physical activity, they often keep coming back because of the social side.** These social connections and the community of the activity played a big role in maintaining people's motivation and enjoyment.

### 2 Build social opportunities into the activities themselves

It works well to **build opportunities for social connection into the physical activities themselves. Doing an activity in pairs or small groups can be one way to do this,** particularly if the activity will make them laugh together. Some people can feel daunted by needing to pick someone to pair up with, particularly if they don't know anyone, so depending on the group it can work well for the instructor to choose these pairs or to **actively encourage people to pair up with someone they haven't talked to before.**

Other physical activities may be more suited to everyone doing the same activity at the same time (for example tai chi or seated group games). This can still foster social interactions and feelings of being part of a group, particularly if participants are given time to chat about it afterwards.

By building social opportunities into the activities, **it can also help to make the physical activity itself more enjoyable for participants** because they are often doing the movements without fully realizing it.

### 3 Allow time for socialising before and/or after the activity

Many of the organisations **purposefully built in time for socializing around the physical activity.** This often took the form of **having a hot drink together before and/or after the activity,** usually within the same venue. Some groups would also organise occasional meet ups separate to the physical activity, for example going for dinner or drinks in the evening.

“ *The sport is just the vehicle for them to socialise* ”  
- Activity organiser

## 4

## Actively introduce people to each other

As mentioned in the warm welcome section, it works well for the instructor or proactive members of the group to **introduce people to each other and get them talking**. As a new member, it can sometimes feel daunting to introduce yourself to others without this additional encouragement.

If people attend the activity with others that they already know, **try to split them up so that they have opportunities to speak to new people**. Similarly, if friendship groups have formed within the group, **make sure these remain welcoming of new people** instead of becoming cliques.

## 5

## Make an occasion of it

One way to combine social connection with physical activity is to **do something different for certain times of the year** (e.g. Christmas or Halloween). This might involve playing music connected to that theme, having themed snacks afterwards or encouraging people to dress up. **Use these occasions as an excuse to have fun, do something different with the activity and get people interacting with each other**.





Further BAB learning resources can be found at:  
<https://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-and-evaluation-hub/>

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